DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 290 033 CE 049 410

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TITLE Practicing Teamwork.
PUB DATE Dec 87
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the American Vocational Association Convention (Las Vegas, NV, December 6-10, 1987).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Agricultural Education; Agricultural Production; *Class Organization; *Cooperation; *Developing Nations; Extension Education; Graduate Study; Higher Education; Interprofessional Relationship; Teaching Methods; *Teamwork

ABSTRACT

At the University of Minnesota, a course entitled "Extension Methods for Ag Production in Developing Countries" has integrated "team" into the instructional plan. Graduate/upper division domestic and foreign students from across departments in the College of Agriculture and from throughout the university enroll. Students apply to be a member of a team, each of which is assigned to one of six developing countries. A Chief of Party is selected to represent the team. Evaluation of the work of the team is done on the basis of the team's total response to the assignment. The team is responsible and thus as a team receives praise or criticism for its effort. General observations are that few of the students know much about team membership, but difficulties disappear as the term progresses. Chiefs are more discriminating in evaluating the effort of individual team members as the term progresses. Dependence on each other seems to spur greater effort than when students work only for themselves. Before adapting the team approach, these criteria should be met: students are at a maturity level where they are capable of self-direction and team effort, assignments should be numerous enough to allow for the team to work out its best method of functioning, and evaluation and grading must recognize individual effort while retaining emphasis on team productivity and product quality. (YLB)

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Presented to Central States Seminar in AgEd, 1987

Practicing Teamwork

by Edgar Persons

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Introduction

Almost all Agricultural education instruction is aimed at producing highly competent, well educated individuals. We take great care to insure that we recognize individual effort. We sometimes even penalize students who succeed in working cooperatively on assignments and most certainly penalize students who "work cooperatively" on examinations. Teamwork is generally not rewarded.

After graduation from colleges and universities, however, many students discover that the real world is made up of highly competent individuals who must work together in teams toward some common goal. Most have few "team" experiences on which to draw and find the idea of team performance frustrating and awkward.

How it Works

At the University of Minnesota, a special effort has been made in one course to integrate "team" into the instructional plan. I teach a course entitled "Extension methods for Ag Production in Developing Countries." It is a graduate/upper division course that draws students from across departments in the College of Agriculture and from throughout the University. The focus of the course, as the title suggests, is on agriculture programs in developing countries. The culminating activity is to

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write a proposal for an assistance project that will help solve a problem associated with extension or agricultural education and some phase of agricultural production.

This course normally has an enrollment of 20-30 students. It is usually about half domestic students with an interest in getting involved (or re-involved) in some form of international work, and about half foreign students in advanced degree programs. It is easily recognized and readily agreed to by both the domestic and foreign students that international development work is almost always a team effort. It is also recognized that teams have leaders and that leaders have and exercise some degree of authority.

The work, readings, assignments, and presentations in class are all done within the context of a specific country. About six developing countries are selected each year to be the focus of the class work. Each "Team", as will be described, is assigned to one of the countries. The country becomes the focus of all the team effort. Because the countries are all different, teams are on their own. They cannot "borrow" from other teams except for sharing concepts and procedures.

During the first class period, all students make application to be a member of one of the teams (see appendix for simple questionnaire/applications). All are encouraged to apply for the Chief of Party role. As soon as applications are complete a team of outsiders - usually two other staff members from Ag Education and a graduate student - interview all of the Chief of Party

candidates and select the Chief of Party for each country. In this process, all class members are assigned to a team which subsequently becomes responsible for all of the assignments for the academic term.

The Chief of Party is a responsible position. He or she is responsible for 1) scheduling the work sessions for the team, 2) conducting the work sessions for the team, 3) coordinating the completion of assignments, 4) turning in all assignments for the term, 5) evaluating the effort of each member and reporting the same to the instructor and, 6) dealing with team interpersonal problems.

Communication with the team members by the instructor is through the Chief of Party, although team members are free to communicate directly with the instructor if the need arises. There is strong encouragement, however, to use the team to solve problems and to rely on the Chief of Party as the team communicator.

Appended to this brief description are samples of the forms used to record team and individual work. The Chief of Party effort report is the primary means of feedback to each student about their contributions and to the instructor about individual cooperation to the team effort. Any disputes over effort are worked out with the Chief of Party. Only rarely is the instructor called upon to render an opinion about the fairness of the effort assessment.

Evaluating the work of the team is done on the basis of the

team's total response to the assignment. Even if parts of the assignment were clearly the responsibility of known team members, the evaluation is based on the total assignment. The team is responsible and thus as a team receives praise or criticism for their effort.

The Results

The course has been taught with various refinements of the team approach for the past three years. There have not been any formal evaluations of the course, but only informal observations of student behavior and performance. The following general observations are made:

1. It is obvious that few of the students know very much about being a member of a cohesive team at the beginning of the term. There is much confusion about getting schedules to mesh, making time for team meetings, etc. As the term progresses, these difficulties seem to disappear. Teams function more smoothly, strengths of individual team members are better utilized and weaknesses are accommodated.
2. There is much more discrimination in evaluating the effort of team members as the team progresses. In the beginning, Chiefs of Party tend to award about equal effort scores to all, regardless of individual contribution. As work progresses, Chiefs of Party award effort scores to reflect true effort. It would not be unusual for a student to get only 10 out of 100

effort points if his/her contribution was minimal toward the end of the term while the same student would have gotten 80 points out of 100 early in the term for the same contribution.

3. The dependence that team members have on each other seems to spur greater effort than when students work only for themselves. This is evident in the use of the library and other resources, the utilization of persons from the subject countries to assist the team and the quality of the final reports that each team produces.
4. Students who do go on to new or renewed international experiences frequently remark about the usefulness of the course and particularly how the team approach was helpful in making their international experience successful.
5. As a side benefit, each year one or two graduate students in other fields who are enrolled in the class, transfer to the Ag Education graduate program for their advanced degree.

Advice to Others

The team approach adds a dimension to the college experience that is sometimes lacking, but there are some criteria that should be considered before the team approach is adapted for use.

1. The students should be at a maturity level where they are capable of self direction and team effort.

2. The subject matter must be adaptable to team work. You would not use teams for subjects where individual effort is more normal behavior.
3. Assignments must be numerous enough so that the team can work out its own best method of functioning as a team.
4. There must be some clear criteria for choosing team leaders. Using an independent panel to select team leaders removes the possibility of instructor favoritism and makes the team a more lifelike simulation.
5. Evaluation and grading must recognize individual effort within teams while retaining the emphasis on team productivity and product quality.
6. Teams must be observed carefully to determine how well they are functioning and assistance given to the team to help it stay on track if needed.
7. The temptation for the instructor to be the team leader for each team must be avoided! Responsibility must be delegated to the team leader. Even when it is obvious there might be a better way to do the job, the team leader and the team are responsible for the choice.

Using a team approach to course management is not all roses, but it does add a dimension to the student experience that for most students will be new. If the situation fits, try it! You and your students will gain from the experience.